Anyone with more than a passing familiarity with the work of Max Weber will recognize that “meaning” (Sinn) is a crucial category for his sociology. He writes that the task of the sociology of religion is “to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action,” namely, religious behavior, which can be understood “only from the subjective experiences, ideas, and purposes of the individuals concerned—in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behavior’s ‘meaning’” (1978: 399). In a sense, for Weber “meaning creates sociology out of history. Meaning interconnects events that would otherwise be theoretically random—which is to say, there is no meaning in history. Events simply happen. The “problem of meaning” is not in events themselves at all, but in the significances that people give to events. All “action” sociologies of religion—that is, all approaches to religion that treat religion as reflecting choice-making behavior, in spite of whatever divergences they may have among them—experience this dilemma. The problem of meaning is one of the most complex problems in social science with particular significance for the study of religion because the act of defining meaning (“the meaning of meaning”) is self-referential (“Meaning ‘means’…”).

Other species besides humans can give meaning to events as well, but lack the linguistic skills to communicate those meanings in a systematic and continuous way to others of their kind. For example, the neighborhood cat gives meaning to our opening the back door because she is often fed a little something when that happens, but she appears unable to communicate that meaning to her friend cat from up the street, who takes off as soon as the door opens. If she could have kittens, she might be able to bring them to the door as well, at the right age. Trusting her, they would learn about the door, but it is still unlikely that the up-the-street cat would. Various animals have various amounts of learning and meaning abilities, but it is difficult to sustain the argument that significant amounts of meaning can be carried by members
of other species, and this becomes particularly marked when we move from the physical to the intellectual. There may have been the occasional cat or dog in centuries past who remained attached to the grave of his or her late master or mistress, but discussion of the significances of these people to them and others are quite something else—just as much between the one dog and other dogs as between the dog and humans (who may, indeed, have more sense of why the dog is doing this than do other dogs).

Meaning-giving and meaning-arguing play important roles in sociology because it is through meanings that we realize the specifically human. This is particularly evident in observing the extent to which humans struggle to translate words across cultures. Words are learned as a result of participation in sociocultural life-worlds; hence it is not the case that every word from one life-world will be able to translate precisely to some other word in a different life-world. “Interpreting” across languages therefore involves not just a vocabulary list but a sense of use-in-context that may in some respects be highly nuanced, while in others is simply one-to-one. Relatively small groups of humans may particularly nuance words—couples who have been together for decades, parents and children, professional work associates, and so on. These nuances are not merely evidences of dialect or technical expertise but often connect to specific shared life experiences that no amount of scholarly training in a particular formal language (e.g., French, Spanish, Swahili, etc.) can possibly fully anticipate. Indeed, in these cases, even people who speak the “same” formal language may miss the nuance that pertains to insiders.

If this is still true in societies today, it stands to reason that it is so much the more so when one tries to “understand” historical movements, trends, shifts, relationships, and so on. Both material and nonmaterial conditions play into this, and while there is a reasonableness to giving temporal priority to material conditions, at the same time it is necessary to insist that changes in material conditions always and everywhere that human beings are found also are interpreted within nonmaterial (that is, ideational) contexts. If something should suddenly fall out of the sky and land in my yard, I am going to approach it with a mind-set shaped primarily by the last quarter of the twentieth century CE. If it had fallen in my yard fifty years ago, I would likely have seen “it” differently. So while, yes, the thing that falls out of the sky is clearly prior to my perception and assessment of it, my interpretive scheme or idea reservoir is itself prior to the material event. Trying to prioritize